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writer who is here to stay' **Joseph O'Connor**

Dead Cat Bounce



DAMIEN OWENS

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FLAME

Hodder & Stoughton

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First published in Great Britain in 2001 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline

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A Flame paperback

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 340 79283 3

Typeset in Fournier by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Praise for DEAD CAT BOUNCE

'A very funny and sparkling début from a writer who is here to stay' Joseph O'Connor

'It's hilarious . . . everything from existentialist nuns to hard ass girls. Every single man should read it to affirm how sad we really are' Dermot O'Leary

'An insightful, very funny novel about the confusions of growing up, at whatever age. A fresh and absorbing peek into the mind of a bloke who's never quite got around to facing up to life' *Heat*

'If you really want to know how men behave when they're behaving really badly, read this. This is very funny' *Company*

About the Author

Damien Owens was born in Monaghan in 1971 and studied English at Queen's University, Belfast. He has worked as a copywriter and a technical writer, and has contributed to a number of magazines. He now lives in Dublin. *Dead Cat Bounce* is his first novel.

This is for Eileen and Marie and Eithne.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are due to my agent, Faith O'Grady at the Lisa Richards Agency in Dublin, and to my editor, Angela Herlihy, at Hodder and Stoughton in London. Stars, both.

I also want to acknowledge the support and help of all those friends who had to put up with a lot of whining about how this book would a) never be finished and b) never be published. Although all of my friends (and several strangers in the street) had to hear about it ad nauseam, chief among the whinees were John Bond, Trish Byrne and Christine Doran. Thanks for not punching me.

1

As a place to meet your friends for a drink, Jolly's had only one thing going for it – it served drink.

There was no Jolly, of course. The place was run by a huge Corkman called Leonard, who was anything but. It might, with greater accuracy, have been called 'Miserable's' or simply 'Bastard's'. It was dark, shabby, and always smelled vaguely of burnt toast. We could be found there two or three times a week, muttering sincere complaints and not moving. That's the Irish for you.

It was a Friday night and it was the usual crowd – Stevie, Go-go, Norm, and me – talking the usual load of complete toss. I had begun to tune out, staring blankly at what later turned out to be Catherine's ass. Well, I mean it later turned out that her name was Catherine. I recognised it as an ass straightaway, and a bloody good one. She was standing nearby with two other girls and a bloke, probably moaning about Leonard's almost comic prices, or his gracious serving style ('You. What?') I idly assumed that the bloke was her boyfriend. She looked like the got-a-boyfriend type. And I hadn't even seen her face properly yet.

'You're a jammy bastard,' I remember Stevie saying, as I dragged my eyes away. 'Jammy, jammy . . . *bastard*.'

'Who is?' I asked, although I could have guessed he was talking about Norm. If I passed a stranger on the street and they were talking about some jammy bastard, I would have assumed they were talking about Norm.

'This gobshite,' Stevie said, pointing his thumb in the predicted direction.

'You've either got it or you haven't,' Norm said, smug as you like.

Go-go hooted and rolled his eyes. 'If what you've got is it, then I'm glad I haven't got it, and I hope I never get it,' he said.

I had completely missed the start of this. 'Remind me again what you're on about?' I asked.

'Wednesday night,' Stevie said, patiently. 'I met Jammy here for a quick pint in town, and he fucked off with some nurse.'

'She was a doctor,' Norm interrupted. 'Not a nurse.'

'What was her name?' Go-go asked.

'Doctor something,' Norm replied, not even trying to be funny. 'Anyway, you should've seen this one. Stevie, what was she like?'

Stevie shrugged. 'She was . . . very . . . attractive.'

There was a pause as we waited for him to elaborate. He didn't, so Norm forged ahead.

'Anyway, the interesting part of this story is not that I caught the eye of some stunning beauty in a pub and she felt drawn to me – you have to expect that. No, the interesting thing here is the way matters proceeded. Now. We're getting on grand – do you come here often, I like your watch, I hate this song . . .'

‘Where were you at this stage?’ I asked Stevie.

‘I’d fucked off home,’ he said. ‘No point in hanging around.’

Norm nodded. ‘Once I get ’em talking, boys, I’m not coming back. You might as well get your coat and go.’

‘Well, it’s either that or you come back in such a stink that you’re not worth talking to. Either way, there’s no point staying.’

Norm ignored the slight and went on with the story. ‘So. We wind up back in her place – cup of coffee, I like your plants, where’d you get the beanbag, you know how it goes. Before long, we’re climbing all over each other. Things are progressing well, and then she starts to get all serious, you know, *talking*.’

‘Uggggh,’ mocked Go-go. ‘*Talking*.’

‘All about herself, of course, how men treat her like shit, how nobody can see past her looks, how they’re all after one thing. I told her it wasn’t true, we were after *one of two* things, but she never even laughed.’

The three of us tried to suppress smiles but couldn’t.

‘Yeah, I know, a fucking great line. She never even smiled. So on she goes about her intelligence, her sensitivity, her love of the outdoors, etc, etc, etc. I was getting really bored, and I still had one hand up the back of her shirt, which was starting to look a bit stupid, what with all the bloody talking going on. So I thought I better declare my intentions.’

‘And?’ I said.

He cleared his throat. ‘I told her that was all well and good, but personally speaking, and I was only speaking for myself here – I fancied the hole off her.’

We shook our heads in disdain.

‘Next thing you know,’ he continued, ‘she’s leading me by

the hand off into her bedroom. Not a word out of her. Big smile, though. All pleased.'

'I don't get it,' Gó-go said.

'Me neither,' I added.

'Well, *listen*, I'm not done yet. Later on, we're lying there, and it's driving me mad, I have to know. So I ask her. Why the big change of heart? One minute it's all men are horny scum, then whom! – *Basic Instinct*. Just like that. And you know what she says?'

Shakes of the head all round.

'She says she was "touched" when I told her I could see "beyond her body" to "the whole woman".'

'When did you say that?' Stevie asked.

'I *didn't*. It turns out, right, it turns out when I said "I fancy the hole off you", she thought I said "I fancy the whole of you".'

He made a sweeping gesture to suggest wholeness. Our jaws dropped. There was a moment's quiet as we all struggled to find the words. That was when a pale hand patted Norm on the shoulder. It was Catherine, or The Girl With The Ass, as I knew her then.

'I couldn't help but overhear your . . . conversation,' she said in measured tones, 'and I just wanted to let you know that you are the most pathetic bunch of wankers I have ever come across in my whole life.'

I know – I *know* – that Norm was going to make some joke about her 'coming across' him any time she liked, darlin', but he didn't get to speak. She was off on one.

'Is this really how you talk about women? Buncha schoolboys. Buncha children. Your type makes me sick. Jesus Christ. What's the matter with you? Frigging *Loaded* readers.'

Christ, was she mad. And heart-stoppingly pretty. Brilliant

blue eyes and high cheekbones. Pale as a stone. Petite, but athletic-looking. It was like Claire Danes and Winona Ryder had a baby.

‘How do you think it makes a woman feel, having to listen to this sort of shite in a public place? You go out for a quiet drink, talk to your friends, have a laugh, and you get *this*.’

She was wearing a crisp white shirt, black trousers, and sturdy black boots. She looked . . . tough. She made her girlfriends, who were watching this exchange with puzzled faces, look frilly and semi-transparent.

‘It makes me want to puke. *Wankers*.’

Did I fall in love with her at first sight? Absolutely. But then she was the third girl I’d fallen in love with that day. Number two had been walking out of Jolly’s as we walked in.

‘Jesus. The nerve of you. The *cheek*. What, are you retarded or something? A wee bit special, are yiz?’

She blanched suddenly then and put her hand to her mouth. It had obviously just occurred to her that one or all of us might indeed be ‘special’. We were probably staring at her with dopey expressions, in all fairness, and Norm’s story hadn’t been a particularly edifying one. But even by our standards, this was not a proud moment. She backed away slightly, and for one brief second looked ready to cry. If we’d all kept quiet, just shut it for ten seconds, she might have turned, grabbed her mates, and left. We would have become a terrible memory for her, the unfortunate simpletons she insulted one night in a horrible pub. ‘I didn’t know!’ she would have told her friends, in tears of shame. ‘I thought they were normal! I DIDN’T KNOW!’

That might have happened, but it didn’t. Instead, Norm fixed

her with a beady eye and declared, at considerable volume, 'Lesbians! You're all the bloody same.'

Well, she broke his nose. She threw herself across the table, spilling pints everywhere, and introduced her tiny fist to Norm's substantial nose with a gut-skewering sound that I can only describe as a 'crick'. One day someone is going to ask me if I know what nose cartilage sounds like when it suddenly leaves its natural home in the centre of a person's face for a new life underneath their right eye. 'Why, yes,' I will say. 'It goes *crick*.' Norm went spinning off his chair, blood and snot already gushing, as the rest of us jumped to our feet and . . . well, and nothing actually. We just jumped to our feet. Any kind of fighting would have been pretty much virgin territory to us. Fighting with a girl was brand-new material. Catherine – or The Girl With The Ass Who Broke Norm's Nose, as I now knew her – appeared quite stunned. Looking at her with something approaching awe, I mistook this for remorse. When she clapped her hands together and squealed with delight, I realised that it was in fact pride. Her friends had crowded around now, patting her on the shoulders and eyeing us with contempt. The solitary bloke among them marched up to me, presumably because I was the smallest, and poked me in the chest with his index finger.

'What the hell's going on?' he demanded, spraying me with saliva. 'What did you do to her?'

He was of average build, not much bigger than me in fact, but there's no doubt that he could have beaten me senseless if he'd wanted. I can say that with confidence because just about anyone can beat me senseless. The Girl With The Ass Who Broke Norm's Nose could have killed me stone dead.

'I didn't do anything to her!' I protested, adopting the classic

arms-spread 'Who? Me?' pose that professional footballers often assume after they've kicked someone's kneecap off. 'We were having a quiet chat and she attacked us!'

This was foolish, on mature reflection, as it opened the door for her side of the story.

'Talking!' she howled, in mock horror, or maybe even real horror. 'Is that what you call it? Tricking poor defenceless women into bed with lies and then laughing about it behind their backs? You call that *talking*?'

Her friends, who clearly hadn't overheard us themselves, gasped and looked faint.

'It wasn't a lie!' cried Stevie, as if that helped. 'He did fancy the hole off her!'

Leonard appeared among us then, muttering long-suffering Break-it-ups. There was nothing to break up really, but everyone took a symbolic step backwards to form a small circle. Norm had made it back up onto his chair by now and was staring at the ceiling moaning almost inaudibly about assault charges.

'Out, all of you,' Leonard said, in a muted tone that suggested we could buy a drink first if we wanted to.

Since all any of us wanted was a swift end to the whole incident, there were no dissenting voices. The girl and her entourage sloped away quietly, still giving us the evil eye, and headed for the main door. They resisted the temptation to hurl further abuse as they left, which was something, I suppose. There were only a dozen or so other people in the place, and up until that point, they'd been holding their collective breath. Now that it was clear that there wasn't going to be real trouble, they seized the opportunity to laugh their arses off. Snatching ruefully at our jackets and staring hard at the floor, we made our way to the side exit.

Once outside, we stood around conducting a brief post-mortem. Though none of us would admit it, the real purpose of this pause was to avoid bumping into the other lot on the street. Looking at our feet, with an occasional nervous glance down the alley, we agreed that we had been treated harshly, not least by Leonard, who surely knew us by now. It would be a long time before we set foot in Jolly's again, we vowed. The viciousness of the actual blow was also discussed. Worthy of a man, Stevie observed – a man who had really practised his punching-people-on-the-nose technique. There was wincing and some sympathetic murmuring as we took turns to examine Norm's ruined hooter. When a few minutes had passed, and we were sure the coast was clear, we sloped out of the alley onto the street and split up, Go-go gamely offering to accompany Norm to casualty. As I turned to go, I distinctly heard Norm remarking that his attacker had at least one redeeming feature.

'Some ass on her though, eh?' he said.

2

Looking for a flat in Dublin is a scarring experience, like attending a war, or a Christian Brothers school. I had five different places in my first eighteen months here, each one like something out of Hieronymus Bosch, only colder and damper, with less pleasant characters.

And the landlords . . . oh, the landlords. After a few days of it, you start to hate yourself because you own a perfectly good kitchen knife, yet still you let them live. 'Compact,' they nod, spreading their arms in some shit-brown little box and almost touching opposing walls. 'Convenient,' they wink, as the roar of passing traffic shakes the stolen Jameson ashtray from the three-and-a-half-legged coffee table. 'Furnished,' they boast, patting the ripped cushion on the ripped couch, shiny with age and lumpy with use. 'Frank and Benny are very happy here,' they conclude, gesturing to the dribbling middle-aged civil servants who could be your new flatmates. Frank and Benny invariably look like famous serial killers. They'd be happy anywhere without bars. (True story: when Fred West was arrested I sat bolt upright in my armchair and told the TV, 'Christ! I nearly moved into

a flat in Ranelagh with that bastard!') You look at the landlord despairingly and think, I'm going to have to murder you now. But you don't say that. You say: 'I'm going to have to think about it.' Because, God help you, this might be the best place you see.

These are my excuses, anyway, for how I came to live at 23C Grosvenor Gardens. I had just been through three weeks of flat-hunting hell, enduring the wind and the rain, the barefaced lies told in the evening paper, the tedious trudging around, the absurd asking prices, the endless queues of Goths and hippies that somehow always got there before me (they have a network of some kind, I'm convinced). I had flicked fizzing light-switches, turned rusty taps, and patted profoundly springless beds until I could flick, turn, and pat no more. My feet felt like raw mince. My brain felt like cooked mince. I was vulnerable, and could smell defeat in the air.

The ad in the paper cheerily described 23C as a 'Neat flatlet with all cons'. Praying that the word 'mod' had been left out accidentally, I dragged myself through the drizzle one more time. It turned out, surprise, surprise, to be a badly furnished bedsit that received almost no natural light and was apparently decorated in some sort of belated tribute to nineteenth-century Poland. Still, it was actually quite a large room and was 'self-contained', a misleadingly upbeat phrase meaning that it had a shower and a loo of its own in a sort of alcove. What's more, the balding, sweating figure who showed me round (by spinning three hundred and sixty degrees on the ball of one foot and saying, 'Well, lad, here she is') didn't seem too objectionable. That is, he didn't appear to be actively evil, although he was a landlord and so had only a nodding relationship with the concepts of honesty and fairness. He was called Mal and I was given to understand